The New Orkney Language Literature

By Harry Josephine Giles

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For a small place, Orkney has produced an extraordinary literature. Simon W. Hall's 2010 study, *The History of Orkney Literature*, which won the Saltire Society First Book Award that year, drew a magisterial line from the sagas through modernism to the contemporary novel. At each stage we can highlight texts of canonical significance and popular success, whether it's the *Orkneyinga Saga*, the poetry of George Mackay Brown, or contemporary work like Luke Sutherland's novel *Venus as a Boy* or Amy Liptrot's memoir *The Outrun*. The great majority of this work, however, is written entirely in English, and

throughout Hall's study the presence of an Orkney language[1] literature – novels, poetry, memoir and performance written in the Orkney variant of the Scots language, strongly influenced by Old Norse and in turn the Orkney Norn – appears in tantalising flashes, never fully emerging. The Orkney language canon is patchy, broken in places, and often hard to find, but thanks to the work of writers, small press publishers, educators and language activists, Hall among them, it's now finding new strength.

Foundational to Orkney language literature is Walter Traill Dennison's *Orcadian Sketchbook* (William Peace and Son 1880) – long out of print and crying out for a new edition. A comparatively well-off Sanday farmer, Dennison combined local orature, folk poetry, his own verse and his own short story writing into an anthology of 'Traits of Old Orkney Life'. The book is the first published work of what Dennison called the Orkney dialect, coming at a crucial linguistic moment when the Orkney Norn – of which only a few scraps of written text survived – had comprehensively merged with the incoming Scots language to form the variant of Scots still spoken, to a greater or lesser extent, in the islands. It also contains the first linguistic study and glossary of the language, later to be expanded in Hugh Marwick's study *Orkney Norn* (Oxford University Press 1929). The *Sketchbook* establishes and argues for an Orkney language literature, a promise writers are still seeking to fulfil.

In the early twentieth century, Robert Rendall and C.M. Costie picked up the torch, both writing Orkney language poems, and Costie writing stories as well. Rendall's Orcadian poetry output was small, alongside English poems, but brought the language to more serious and existential concerns than Dennison's largely satirical writing. Published in his own three collections and in Ernest Marwick's – otherwise almost entirely English – *An Anthology of Orkney Verse* (Kirkwall Press 1949), poems like 'The Planticru' and 'The Cragsman's Widow', alongside Orkney versions of Greek and Latin classical poetry, are concerned with daily aspects of Orkney life, with the confrontation with death, and with, as is often the case with early minority language literature, the fading of language and tradition.

C.M. Costie's poetry engages similar concerns, but her short stories push the 'dialect tale' into territory of special tenderness and literary experimentation. Her study of the patterns and registers of the Orkney language is the most

comprehensive in the literature: her stories are able to convey different island origins of different speakers through a painstaking orthography still accessible to Orkney readers, and her Orkney language narration captures the complex attitudes and double meanings of her narrators. What may appear to outsiders as folksy yarn-spinning often disguises both sharp critique and subtle emotion.

Ragnhild Ljosland's scholarly study *Chrissie's Bodle* (Orcadian 2011) gives Costie the critical and biographical attention she deserves, and also sets her in the context of the literary milieu of the time. She was a member of a literary set with Rendall, Marwick and George Mackay Brown, writers sharing work with each other, offering critiques, and furthering the literature. But I would argue that where Ernest Marwick achieved extensive local literary success and Brown national and international readership, Rendall and Costie were sidelined partly because of their commitment to the language (and, in Costie's case, her gender).

That Orcadian was an irrelevant language was established as a concept by Dennison, undercutting his own work with false modesty – 'a rude language, now fast becoming obsolete' (p.xi) – furthered by Marwick even as he produced his own glossaries and language studies – 'our language in the Twentieth Century is English' (p.77) – and argued fiercely and famously by the earlier Edwin Muir, Orkney-born and mentor to Brown, against the Scots of Hugh MacDiarmid, in *Scott and Scotland* (George Routledge & Sons 1936). As a result of these currents, Muir used no Orcadian, and Orkney's other successful writers of the period, such as Brown and the novelist Eric Linklater, featured only fragments of Orkney speech in dialogue, usually when characters were cast as social inferiors. This approach dominated the literature and held back the language, creating the false impression that it was only suitable for non-serious purposes – and thus that any usage of it couldn't be serious.

This Catch-22, which is by no means unique to Orcadian among minority and marginalised languages, echoes through the remaining twentieth century literature. The flame is kept burning by folklorists, memoirists and writers of popular verse such as Jack Cooper, Margaret Stevenson Headley, R.T. Johnson and David Sinclair. Orkney language is used in the poetry, extensively in dialogue, and occasionally in narration.

The role of local newspapers such as *The Orcadian* and magazines such as the *Orkney View* is vital here: as with Costie and Rendall, it was small-scale local

efforts that kept a language literature in print through publishing stories, poems and sketches in periodicals. Institutions like the WRI and the Young Farmers, as well as weddings and festivals, also provided support to writing and performing poetry and drama in the Orkney language. As I've suggested, the mistake should not be made that all this writing is non-literary: on the contrary, it's a deep well of feeling and critique. However, the minoritisation of the language, perpetuated not just through literary snobbery but also through an education system that beat out Orcadian with physical force, did prevent the language from achieving its full range of expression in media and theme: to my knowledge it is not used in any twentieth century novel after the fragments in Brown, nor in any poetry or play published outwith the islands.

It's important to draw a contrast with the situation in Shetland, which has a closely related language formed by the same interaction of Norn and Scots, and which started from a very similar literary position. George Stewart's *Shetland Fireside Tales* (T & J Manson 1877, and still in print with new editions) has an analogous role to Dennison; Jakob Jakobsen's *Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland* (V Prior 1928) has an analogous role to Hugh Marwick, who drew heavily on Jakobsen in his own work; and J.J. Haldane Burgess, beginning with *Rasmie's Büddie* (T & J Manson 1891), to Costie and Rendall. In each of these cases the Shetland work begins earlier and is somewhat more wide-ranging, but not so much as to create such a divergence as is seen in the later twentieth century.

Because where the Orkney library shelves are largely empty, the Shetland library shelves have a profusion of small press poetry, novels using dialect, and other literary work, all in a clearly unbroken canon of writing and publishing. A vital contrast is that, when Muir and Ernest Marwick were arguing against a literary Orcadian, the *New Shetlander* magazine, founded in 1947, was arguing fervently for a Shetland language literature, and providing it an active home. Similarly, John J. Graham and T.A. Robertson published their scholarly *Grammar and Usage of the Shetland Dialect* with the *Shetland Times* in 1952, and argued for their language within the education system, while Orkney lacked a full dictionary until Gregor Lamb's 1988 *Orkney Wordbook* (Kirkwall Press), still lacks a complete grammar, and likely had fewer defenders in the education system until much later.

This, however, is beginning to change, and the Orkney language literature is

shining brighter. Fiona MacInnes' novel *Iss* (Stromness Books and Prints 2013) is the first novel I know of to include extensive and consistent Orcadian in its dialogue throughout; moreover, it's a passionate and rich investigation of social dynamics in Orkney in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Breaking thoroughly with the mythical and spiritual vision of Brown, and with the long tradition of historical novels, MacInnes writes through class conflict and economic precarity, and through the dramatic social changes of an increasing population of English- and Scots-speaking new islanders,[2] into a tapestry of contemporary social life.

There are similar concerns in the work of Morag MacInnes, published in *Alias Isobel* (Hansel Cooperative Press 2008) and *Street Shapes* (Blurb 2013), as well as numerous contemporary anthologies: this Orkney language poetry does explore memory and history, but through a wide lens and contrasting to a contemporary setting. Simon Hall and Alison Miller, also known for her novel *Demo* (Penguin 2006) partly written in a mainland Scots, have published poems and short stories using Orcadian in chapbooks from Abersee Press, again moving the language into a contemporary setting. Both have also published wide-ranging essays on the contemporary use and meaning of the language in both Abersee books and on Hall's blog, brisknortherly.wordpress.com. Alec Finlay's books *ebban an flowan* (morning star 2015) and *minnmouth* (morning star 2017) both investigate Orcadian as one of a range of languages and dialects, and have published some of my own Orkney language translations alongside Finlay's work and contributions from other writers and linguists.

This flourishing is supported by a range of work at the local and national level. Again, small presses are essential: Abersee Press – run by Duncan McLean, formerly of Clocktower Press, significant in an earlier Scottish literary flourishing – has published half a dozen chapbooks of contemporary Orkney writing, set in an international context and featuring a range of Orkney language voices;[3] Hansel Co-operative Press, based in Orkney and Shetland, has produced multiple anthologies featuring Orkney and Shetland languages together, including 2018's *the crow in the rear view mirror*.

The Shetland connection is significant, with mutual interest and support between the islands strengthening the literature: projects such as *Writing the North: Archipelagos* (University of Edinburgh 2014) and *Reel to Rattling Reel*

(Cranachan 2018) have both supported a joint literature and engaged academic research. At the governmental level, the Scots Language Ambassadors scheme placed Simon Hall in Orkney for a year to work on language promotion, and the Orkney Islands Council Culture Fund enabled the digitisation of Gregor Lamb and Margaret Flaws' *Orkney Dictionary* at orkneydictionary.scot. Again setting the Orkney language in a context of plurality and internationalism, Scottish PEN's 'Many Voices' project funded workshops in Orcadian writing, led by Alison Miller, with a group of writers continuing to meet and exciting literary results published in *Gutter Magazine* (Autumn 2018).

It's in this context that my own current work takes place. *Deep Wheel Orcadia*, the creative project of my PhD at the University of Stirling, is an Orcadian science fiction verse novel: written in an Orkney language, it imagines a future society on a distant space station that's very much like Orkney and also very much not. Like my contemporaries, I cannot escape the shadow of George Mackay Brown's mythic vision of Orkney, but I rub against it and shift around it as much as I move through it, and the language provides one way to do that. Similarly, shifting my focus to a technological future (as Alec Finlay does with his work inspired by Orkney's renewable energy projects) breaks Orkney and its language free of the nostalgic myth of dwindling traditions into a world that's diverse, messy, conflictual and real. My approach to the language and themes are my own, with my own shortcomings and eccentricities, but it's not a solo project: it's part of and supported by a pluralistic Orkney language movement that's working (quietly and patiently, as Orkney does) to fulfil a 140-year-old promise.

There are, of course, challenges. Not least of these is how to write Orcadian; it has no standardised orthography or grammar, pronunciation varies considerably between islands and generations, and the interrupted nature of the canon means that conventions have not been established and registers are missing. This challenge brings its opposite, which is: who can read Orcadian. More than once I've spoken to folk who are fluent in spoken Orcadian but who struggle to make intuitive sense of, for example, Costie's writing – even if it's your own language from birth, you still have to learn to read it, and many Orcadians have been denied the chance. A readership outside of Orkney faces a double barrier: even if they're familiar with reading variants of Scots, the Orkney language needs to be learned again; if they're not familiar and supportive of Scots, they may dismiss the whole project out of hand.

That brings us to the challenge of where Orcadian fits in to the Scots language project as a whole: what are we to do when the areas of Scotland with the strongest Scots language communities – Orkney, Shetland, Aberdeenshire and Glasgow – speak the variants of Scots most distant from what standardisations do exist? This problem means that, for example, if I were to write a novel in Orcadian with a standardised Scots orthography (and I have experimented with versions of this), Orcadian speakers would find it completely alien, and other Scots speakers wouldn't know how to sound it. And then there's the problem that folk like me face, and there's an increasing number of us: from an incomer family, but learning to speak in an Orkney language community, I 'naturally' speak neither perfect English nor perfect Orcadian, and the way I speak either marks me as outside to both. Do I have a right to write in Orcadian, and if so how, and who will read it?

For me, the answers can only come through doing it. Languages are not declared by government fiat, nor can dictionaries and standard grammars bring them into being; though both government financial support, popular linguistics and academic research are crucial, any language will always start from and evolve beyond those limits. Both the fluent writers and the fluent readers can only be brought into being by reading and writing – hesitant at first, perhaps, and stumbling in confusion here and there, but always working to fulfil the promise. My hunch is that it's that all these writers' inclusive and diverse approach to language, acknowledging difference and change, supported by respect for vernacular and an understanding of standards, that will not just keep the language alive, but keep it vibrant with life.

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(c) The Bottle Imp